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HISTORY

OF THE

ANCIENT

WORLD

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A History of Byzantium

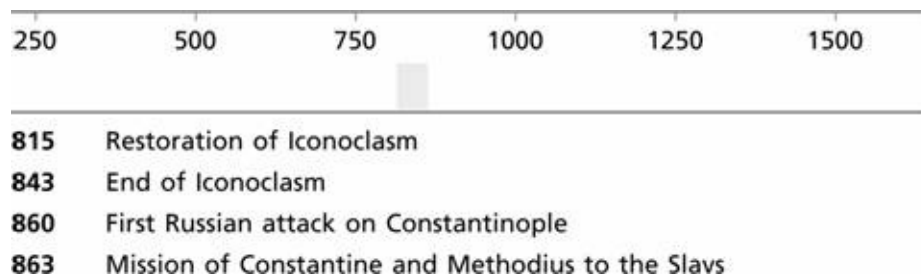
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Continued Struggle over Ikons



Nikephoros (802– 811)

A plot was formed in 802, while ambassadors of Charlemagne were still in Constantinople. Irene was deposed and she withdrew to a monastery she had earlier founded. The conspirators chose Nikephoros (802–11) as the new emperor; Nikephoros held several important civil offices, including that of *logothete tou genikou*, and he perhaps also had military experience to go along with his administrative skills; according to one source he was descended from the royal house of the Ghassanid Arabs.

Nikephoros was an Iconophile, but he sought to maintain a moderate policy against some of those, especially in the monasteries of Constantinople (called zealots by some historians), who wanted the state to base all its policies on a strict interpretation of canon law. As we have said, we should be very careful not to imagine that there were political parties in the modern sense in Byzantium, but for the purposes of analysis we can group individuals into categories that will help us understand their points of view. Thus, as mentioned in the previous chapter, immediately after Irene restored the veneration of ikons, a group of monks demanded severe punishment for Iconoclasts, strict adherence to canon law, and the condemnation of what they considered to be immorality in the

imperial palace (the Moechian issue). This group was also opposed to the appointment of laymen to the episcopacy, favoring those who had spent long years in the monastic life. Thus, there was some concern when, after the death of the patriarch Tarasios in 806, Nikephoros had him replaced by another layman and former bureaucrat, also named Nikephoros. Theodore of Stoudios, in particular, objected to the ecclesiastical policies of the emperor and he was exiled once again in 809. As a result of his moderate religious policies, the emperor Nikephoros earned the hostility of the monastic writers (mainly Theophanes), who are our main source of information about the period.

There is no doubt, however, that Nikephoros had considerable success, and he sought to improve the functioning of the state, in both military and administrative terms, something that was sorely needed after the confusion and occasional laxity under Irene. The new emperor wished, in particular, to insure the full and proper collection of taxes, which had frequently been remitted under Irene. In the early ninth century state income was based primarily on the land tax, still calculated on the basis of the quality and the quantity of the agricultural and pastoral land owned by each family. Default in payment was to be covered by the village community as a whole, an institution called *allelengyon*, an important and generally beneficial system, which was designed to insure the collection of tax by the state while keeping land in the hands of the small farmers by covering shortfalls in tax payments through common subscription. In addition to the land tax, there was a poll tax, the *kapnikon*, payable by all rural inhabitants of the empire, regardless of whether they owned land or not, and there were also customs duties on goods brought into Byzantium; these latter were very high and reasonably well regulated, in part because the state was able to force goods to enter the empire through a small number of border crossings.

Charlemagne, the western emperor, tried to force Nikephoros to recognize his claim to the imperial title by exerting military pressure in Dalmatia. Nikephoros, however, worked to re-establish Byzantine power in the Balkans, beginning with the reconquest of the Peloponnesos and the creation of new *themes*: Thrace, Thessaloniki, Macedonia, Kephalaria, Dyrrachium, and the Peloponnesos, all of these in the Balkans. He also made great use of the policy of population transfers, with a focus in the Balkans, settling loyal groups and tribes near the western frontiers and removing possibly disloyal elements from areas where they might pose a danger. These settlers in the Balkans seem to have provided the population base for the Byzantine revival in this area in the years that followed.

The re-establishment of Byzantine power and the revival of economic

prosperity in the Balkans probably went hand in hand. Whether these were the result more of imperial policy than of developments that had been going on independently at a local level is difficult to say; probably both phenomena were operating together. In any case, we can see some small evidence of the recovery of urban life in the early ninth century in places like Greece. For the first time in two centuries we begin to note the appearance of imported pottery in provincial areas, and there is reason to believe that the urban population began once again to increase. The creation of *themes* in areas of the Balkans and the imperial show of strength may not have had this as their primary goal, but improvement in local conditions certainly must have been affected by these developments.

Nikephoros was forced to negotiate terms in the face of a powerful Arab invasion under Harun-ar-Raschid. The emperor was, however, remarkably successful in the West, re-establishing Byzantine domination of the Dalmatian coast and defeating the Slavs in the Peloponnesos and in the area of Serdica in Bulgaria. The Bulgar Khan Krum became alarmed at these Byzantine successes, but Nikephoros' troops responded by defeating the Bulgars and destroying their capital of Pliska. In 811 Nikephoros led a great campaign against the Bulgars, again taking Pliska and forcing Krum to sue for peace. Nikephoros pressed on with the war, hoping for the complete defeat of Bulgaria. At the moment of his greatest success, Nikephoros and his entire army were caught in an ambush in the passes near Pliska: at the Battle of Pliska the emperor was killed, along with many of his generals and a large part of his army. Krum later turned the emperor's skull into a drinking cup with which he had his allies toast his victory. This was one of the worst defeats that the Byzantines suffered and it turned a brilliant military campaign into total disaster. Nikephoros was the first Byzantine emperor to fall in war since the Battle of Adrianople in 378, but his policies and administration strengthened the state in ways that were important for the future.

Nikephoros had already crowned his son Stavrakios (Staurakios) as emperor in 803. Stavrakios was with his father at the final battle at Pliska but he was severely wounded. At first he was recognized as emperor, but his wound made it unlikely he would ever rule. As a result factions at court were divided between his wife Theophano, a relative of the former empress Irene, and his sister Prokopia, who was married to Michael Rangabe. Rumor had it that Stavrakios planned to pass the throne on to Theophano, or even to establish a republic, and Prokopia and her faction forced her brother to abdicate and retire to a monastery, where he soon died.

Michael I Rangabe (811–813)

Thus, Nikephoros' successor was his brother-in-law, Michael I Rangabe, who held the title of *kouropalates*, giving him a rank just below that of the emperor. Michael I was the first emperor with a proper family name, an indication that aristocratic families were beginning to form as a result of the increased stability of the age. Michael campaigned with Nikephoros but managed to escape the disaster in Bulgaria, and his accession was accepted when he signed a statement, provided by the patriarch Nikephoros, that he would uphold orthodoxy (meaning Iconophile doctrine).

Michael's political policies were in marked contrast to those of Nikephoros I, and he made lavish donations to churches, monasteries, and charitable organizations. He immediately came to terms with the monks who had opposed Nikephoros, recalled Theodore of Stoudios from exile, and condemned the "adultery" of Constantine VI (which remained a live issue). Michael's policy was also conciliatory toward the West, allowing direct communication with the papacy, and he planned to marry his son to a Frankish bride. Michael agreed to recognize Charlemagne's claim to the imperial title, and from this time onward the Byzantine emperors regularly took the title *basileus Romaion* ("emperor of the Romans") to distinguish themselves from the "lesser" emperors in the West; thus, in the Byzantine view, there was still only one empire, and the western rulers were simply tolerated as a matter of convenience or necessity. Retreating from the financial restraint of Nikephoros, Michael was lavish in his grants of money, especially to the clergy, and the state was in a financially difficult situation. In the Balkans Khan Krum was triumphant, and he met with virtually no resistance from any Byzantine army.

Even the monastic chroniclers realized that Michael's position was untenable in the face of obvious military and financial weakness, and plots were hatched by those who wished to bring back Iconoclasm, including, yet once again, the unfortunate sons of Constantine V. When Michael tried to take the field against Krum in 813, one of his generals, Leo, *strategos* of the Anatolikon theme, deserted him and seized Constantinople. Michael was deposed and exiled, and Leo V the Armenian (813–20) was made emperor in his place.

Second Iconoclasm

Leo V clearly felt, along with many in the army, that the military disasters of the

past quarter-century were God's punishment of the empire for idolatry after the abandonment of Iconoclasm. The new emperor consciously imitated Leo III in policy and even had his elder son renamed Constantine in order to complete the identification. In the short run Leo's military success was no greater than that of his predecessors, but he met with a stroke of good fortune when Khan Krum suddenly died in April 814. Leo was able to conclude a peace of 30 years with Krum's son, Omurtag, who was more concerned with his western frontier, where he was threatened by the Franks. The border between Byzantium and the Bulgars was restored to where it had been in 780, and the peace allowed Leo to make some progress in rebuilding the cities of Thrace and Macedonia which had been ravaged in the recent fighting. In addition, there is some evidence that Leo made tentative steps in the direction of introducing the Bulgars to Christianity. This attempt failed completely, but it foreshadowed important developments that were to take place later in the century.

Meanwhile, Leo set about restoring Iconoclasm within the empire. In 814 he established a commission to investigate the issue, under the leadership of John Grammatikos, a young but learned monk who was to be the main intellectual force behind the new Iconoclastic movement. The commission issued an exhaustive argument in favor of Iconoclasm, which the patriarch Nikephoros refused to sign. The emperor then removed the great ikon of Christ that hung over the Bronze Gate of the palace, symbolizing the return of Iconoclasm as imperial policy, and in 815 he forced the patriarch Nikephoros to abdicate and go into exile. A council was held in Hagia Sophia which reaffirmed the Iconoclast Council of Hiera (754), and many bishops and monks were exiled, including, once again, Theodore of Stoudios. From exile Theodore organized opposition against renewed Iconoclasm and actively sought the intervention of the papacy, which of course had always remained firmly in favor of the veneration of ikons. Previous opponents of imperial religious policy had appealed to the papacy in their attempts at opposition, but this was to become an especially common theme in the upcoming years, something that was to add to the complexity of religious and political debate of the time.

In 820 one of Leo V's old comrades in arms, Michael the Amorion, became involved in a plot against the emperor, apparently largely for personal and family reasons. The plot was detected and Michael was sentenced to death by being tied to an ape and cast into the furnaces that heated the baths of the imperial palace. The sentence was put off until after Christmas, but Michael rallied some of his supporters who, dressed in clerical robes and posing as members of the choir,

entered Hagia Sophia during the services for Christmas morning. They stole up to the altar, murdered Leo, and proclaimed Michael as emperor.

The Amorion Dynasty

Michael II the Amorion (820–9) was a soldier and a practical ruler. He was born in the important city of Amorion and, because of that, he is regarded as the founder of the Amorion dynasty. He was probably himself an Iconoclast, but he wished to discourage dissension over the matter and so ended the persecution of the Iconophiles, recalled the exiles (including the patriarch Nikephoros and Theodore of Stoudios), and forbade discussion of the issue. Michael II's reign was marked by the revolt of Thomas, probably a Slav settled in Asia Minor. Thomas the Slav had a checkered career and had been involved in at least one previous revolt, but he held the important military office of *tourmarches* in the Anatolikon *theme*. He revolted a second time and fled to the court of the Caliph Ma'mun (813–33, the son of Harun-ar-Raschid), who promised him aid. Thomas put together a heterogeneous force in the eastern frontier districts of the empire. Rather curiously, to bolster his claims he said that he was Constantine VI, who had been deposed nearly a quarter of a century earlier. He drew to his cause many Iconophiles and all the dispossessed elements in Asia Minor: these included individuals from the Caucasus, Slavs, the poor of the countryside, and the Paulicians. The latter were undoubtedly the most important of the heretical movements of Asia Minor in the middle Byzantine period; they were dualists, with beliefs that corresponded in many ways to the rigorist movements of earlier times (Montanists, Novatians) and possibly even to the ancient Manichaeans, although there is no reason to think that they represented continuity with any of these. The caliph arranged for the coronation of Thomas by the patriarch of Antioch, and much of the imperial army and navy of Asia Minor went over to his side. Modern historians have been intrigued by this phenomenon, since it may have been one of the few truly revolutionary movements in the history of Byzantium, but one should probably not overestimate the social aspects, and it is clear that Thomas' goal was primarily political – the seizure of the imperial throne – and that he had no real program of social change. Thomas controlled most of Asia Minor for two years (821–3) and besieged Constantinople, beginning in December 821. Like so many before him, however, he was unable to take the city and his forces were scattered by the intervention of the Bulgar Khan Omurtag, who came to the aid of his ally Michael. After this, the revolt

quickly collapsed, and Thomas was captured and executed. This, by the way, may have been the last of the revolts by a *theme* commander and it thus also testifies to the solidification of the *theme* system and the increasing control of the central government over the provinces.

The revolt of Thomas the Slav had naturally weakened Byzantium and, although the caliph was not able to take advantage of the situation, Arabs from elsewhere did so. In 826/8 Crete was taken by Arab adventurers from Spain, and in 827/9 Spanish Arabs were able to establish footholds in Sicily. The Arab presence on these two islands was to have serious repercussions for Byzantium. Crete became a base for Arab pirates who made the Aegean and its shorelines unsafe for the Byzantines and presumably also disrupted trade in the area. The establishment of Arab bases on Sicily was the beginning of a long contest between Byzantines and Arabs for control of southern Italy and Sicily that was also to involve the papacy and, eventually, other powers from Western Europe. The Arabs also used these Sicilian bases to raid Italy and the Balkans, while the Cretan Arabs terrorized the Aegean area and the coastlands of Greece.

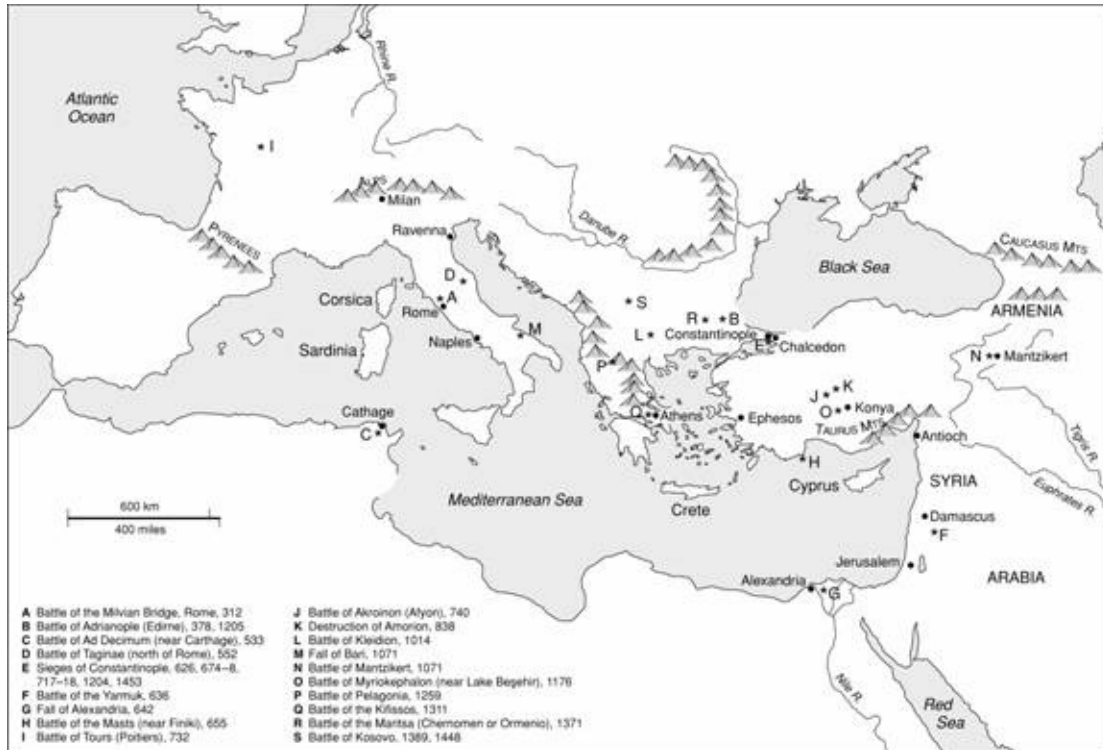
Michael II maintained a position of religious moderation throughout his reign, but his policies were nonetheless opposed by individuals, especially monks under the leadership of Theodore of Stoudios. They would accept nothing short of a full restoration of ikons and condemnation of the Iconoclasts. In this they continued to appeal to the papacy, but when a messenger came to Constantinople with a letter from the pope in support of ikons, the emperor had him mistreated and thrown into prison. Michael also sought to outdo his opponents by asking for support from the western emperor, Louis the Pious. These appeals for western assistance in Byzantine domestic, especially religious, affairs were forerunners of similar phenomena in years to come.

Theophilos (829–842)

Michael II the Amorian was succeeded by his son, Theophilos, who had been crowned as co-emperor in 821. Unlike his father, Theophilos was cultured and learned, having been taught by John Grammatikos. In military terms, however, Theophilos' reign was a disaster. He won some victories in the East, but he was defeated practically everywhere else. One of the signal events was the fall of Amorion, an important Byzantine city in western Asia Minor and ancestral home of the dynasty, to the Arabs in 838 ([Map 9.1](#)). Palermo fell to the Spanish Arabs in 831 and all of western Sicily was in their hands by 841. In 839 the Arabs

invaded southern Italy, seized Taranto, and thus effectively cut Byzantine Italy in two. Theophilos sought aid against the Arabs in Italy from the German emperor Louis the Pious and the Umayyad caliph Abd ar-Rakhman II.

Map 9.1 Battles in Byzantine history (after Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 5th edn (Belmont, CA, 2003), map 7.4, p. 181)



Despite, or because of, these difficulties Theophilos was able to make some administrative changes, generally directed toward the military strengthening of the empire. He repaired the walls of Constantinople, which had deteriorated over time, and created three new *themes*: Paphlagonia and Chaldia in Asia Minor, and Cherson on the peninsula at the north of the Black Sea. He also formed three defensive districts, called *kleisourai*, along the eastern frontier of the empire; the *kleisourai* were military districts smaller than a theme, and, as their name indicates, they were often located along major passes that formed invasion routes into the Byzantine heartland.

Under Theophilos Iconoclasm experienced its last real efflorescence. In 837 John Grammatikos became patriarch, and a persecution of the Iconophiles began, directed especially at the monks. Two well-known Palestinian monks, Theodore and Theophanes, were brought to Constantinople, and Iconoclast verses were written on their foreheads with red-hot irons, giving them the name of the *graptoi* (“those who were written on”). It is difficult to know how strong

the Iconoclast movement was at this time, whether it was still a vibrant and popular idea or whether its support had diminished. Certainly its strongest argument had been confounded by the military defeats of Michael II and Theophilos, but it would be wrong to think that its vitality had completely disappeared.

Theophilos seems to have been, personally, something of a romantic, and he had a strong admiration for Arab culture. He even sent emissaries to Baghdad to gain information and architectural ideas from the court there, and there is reason to believe that Byzantine art and architecture in this period were influenced by developments in the caliphate. Theophilos seems to have encouraged learning in Constantinople. When Leo the Mathematician, a polymath with interests in mechanics and communications as well as ancient literature and theology, was invited to the court of the caliph Ma'mun, Theophilos refused to let him go, but set him up at public expense as a teacher in one of the main churches of Constantinople. This was a major step for the revival of learning, including quite sophisticated mathematical and philosophical education.

Box 9.1 The Byzantine City of Amorion and its Excavation

The city of Amorion (Amorium) was located in Phrygia in central Asia Minor, not far from the modern Turkish village of Emirdağ. It clearly existed in Hellenistic and Roman times, but reached its greatest importance in the early Byzantine period, in large part because its central height was fortified in the seventh century as one of the main places of defense against Arab invasions seeking to strike into the heart of the Byzantine Empire. Little is known of the city's history, except for the legend that the Greek fable-writer Aesop (seventh to sixth century BC) was a native and that bishops are attested there from AD 431 onward. The best-known facts about the city are that it was the home of Michael the Amorian, founder of the Amorian dynasty, and that it suffered a devastating siege and destruction by the forces of the caliph Al-Mut'asim in 838.

Intensive archaeological work at Amorion, however, promises to give us a unique look at a Byzantine city of the mid seventh to early ninth centuries. Early explorations in the vicinity were carried out in the nineteenth century, but more systematic exploration was begun in the 1980s by R. M. Harrison and these were continued by C. S. Lightfoot and colleagues in the 1990s and 2000s. This work has transformed our idea of the city in this period. Detailed archaeological survey, geophysical prospecting, and excavation have brought the city to life, providing information not only about the history of the site but also of its economy, industrial activity, defense, and art. Recent studies have provided detailed information about sculpture, pottery, metal, and architectural decoration at the site, and more detail will certainly be forthcoming.

Byzantine Amorion was well laid out, with a defensive citadel near the center and a broader urban area down below; both of these areas were defended by a strong fortification wall. Rather surprisingly, although the famous destruction of the city in 838 can be attested in the archaeological remains, it is clear that the city lived on as a center of Byzantine activity until at

least the eleventh century. Churches and other structures were rebuilt, pottery and other material was manufactured in the city, and life continued on until the uncertain situation of the eleventh century brought an end to the Byzantine period of life at the site. Further excavations and publications from the research team at Amorion will certainly provide important information about this presently little-known area of the Byzantine world.

FURTHER READING

C. S. Lightfoot, *Amorium: A Brief Guide to a Late Roman and Byzantine City in Central Anatolia*. Istanbul, 1994.

C. S. Lightfoot, ed., *Amorium Reports II: Research Papers and Technical Reports*. Oxford, 2003.

Theophilos' concern for justice was legendary and there are many stories of him wandering through the streets of the capital, encouraging people to present their problems to him, and then taking action against unjust administrators and judges. The *Timarion*, a satirical work of the twelfth century, undoubtedly reflected this view of the emperor and depicted him as the judge of the dead in Hades. Theophilos probably ordered the opening of provincial mints, for the striking of the bronze coinage that was used in local commerce. This probably had a significant impact on the revival of a monetary economy and the improvement of the overall Byzantine economic situation at this time.

Theophilos' stepmother Euphrosyne arranged for her son one of the "bride shows" that had been established earlier by her own grandmother, the empress Irene. These rituals, if indeed they are not merely literary inventions, have the character of romance, known in the West in stories like that of Cinderella. Imperial officials scoured the provinces looking for girls who met specific qualifications which were written down and captured in a picture. Somehow a small group of finalists was assembled and the emperor made his choice by giving the winner an apple or a ring. In any case, the choice of brides from within the empire was in contrast to the marriage alliances with foreigners that were characteristic of the seventh century, and it reinforced the concept that an empress could come from any social class and from any part of the empire. In the present case Theophilos rejected the beautiful poet Kassia and chose Theodora, the daughter of a provincial military official, apparently unaware that she was an Iconophile. The couple had five daughters before the birth of a son, Michael, who ultimately succeeded to the throne.

The Restoration of Ikons

Theophilos died in 842, leaving behind his wife Theodora and his son Michael III (842–67), who was then only 3 years old but who had already been crowned as emperor. Naturally, a regency was established to rule in the name of the young emperor, in this case headed by Theodora, along with the eunuch Theoktistos (*logothete tou dromou*), Theodora's brothers Bardas and Petronas, and the *magister* Sergios Nikitaiates. Theodora's main goal was the restoration of ikons. Naturally, it was important, as far as possible, to preserve the reputation of Theophilos, since the regency's power depended completely on its relationship to him, and Theodora accordingly circulated the story that on his deathbed Theophilos had repented of Iconoclasm. She felt no need to summon a church council, but in 843 simply assembled a group of officials who accepted the teachings of the Second Council of Nicaea of 787 and deposed the patriarch John Grammatikos. This event is still celebrated by the Orthodox church, on the first Sunday in Lent, as the "Sunday of Orthodoxy."

As time went on, affairs fell more and more under the control of the eunuch Theoktistos, whose career and character have been blackened by later historians. Theoktistos managed the temporary reconquest of Crete, although the island

Box 9.2 The Poet Kassia (fl. 840)

Kassia, was, along with Anna Komnena, one of the best-educated of Byzantine women. She was an aristocrat and a nun. Her poetry could be filled with feeling and sensitivity (see the poem on Mary Magdeline below), but it also demonstrated a typical Byzantine disdain for other peoples (see the poem on the Armenians). According to one tradition, in 830 Kassia took part in a bride show arranged by Euphrosyne, the step-mother of the emperor Theophilos. Despite Kassia's beauty and accomplishments, Theophilos chose Theodora to be his wife and Kassia entered a monastery. Kassia wrote not only poems, but the religious music to accompany some of them, and several of these survive and are still used in the services of the Orthodox church today:

Prayer of Mary Magdeline

Lord, the woman who fell into many sins
has perceived your divinity and joins the procession of myrrh-bearing women.
Lamenting, she brings you myrrh, before your burial.
"O!" she cries, "what night falls on me,
what dark and moonless madness of wild-desire,
this thirst for sin.
Take my spring of tears
You who draw water from the clouds,
bend to me, to the sighing of my heart,
You who bend the heavens in your secret incarnation,

I will kiss your immaculate feet
and wipe them dry
with the hair of my head.
When Eve, at twilight in Paradise
heard the sound of your feet, she hid in terror.
Who will trace the abundance of my sins
or your unfathomable judgments, Saviour of my soul?
Do not abandon me, your slave
in your immeasurable mercy.”

On the Armenians

The most terrible race of the Armenians
Is deceitful and evil to extremes,
Mad and capricious and slanderous
And full of deceit, being greatly so by nature,
Once a wise man said of them appropriately:
Armenians are evil even when they are obscure.
On being honored they become more evil;
On acquiring wealth they (become) even more evil on the whole;
But when they become extremely wealthy and honored,
They appear to all as evil doubly compounded.
(C. Trypanis, *Medieval and Modern Greek Poetry* (Oxford, 1951), p. 43)

was quickly taken back by the Arabs when quarrels broke out within the regency. Affairs in the church remained somewhat confused, since the regency was concerned to avoid outright condemnation of former Iconoclasts (including members of the ruling dynasty) while many, including the Stoudite monks, insisted on nothing less than that. In 847 Theodora chose the monk Ignatios as patriarch of Constantinople; he was a son of Michael I and had been castrated and forced to take monastic vows when his father was deposed in 813. Since Ignatios was a monk, his appointment was welcomed by the monks of the capital.

Meanwhile, Michael had been growing up. An appreciation of his character is especially difficult because most of what we know about him comes from later historians who had reason to denigrate the last of the Amorian emperors and who depicted Michael in an unflattering light and gave him the nickname “the Drunkard.” It does, however, seem clear that Michael was not especially interested in affairs of state, at least at a young age. He already had a mistress, Eudokia Ingerina, but Theodora arranged a bride show where Eudokia

Dekapolitissa was chosen as the emperor's wife. Chafing under what he regarded as interference from his mother, the 15-year-old Michael conspired with his uncle Bardas, who arranged for the assassination of Theoktistos in 855. The next year Michael proclaimed himself sole ruler and exiled Theodora to a monastery.

As mentioned above, the reign of Michael III is difficult to evaluate on the basis of the hostile Byzantine sources, but Arab historians provide a useful counter-view, for they describe in some detail the military victories under Michael III; and Byzantine popular poetry portrays a ruler, probably Michael himself, who fought heroically and successfully against the Arabs and whose forces pushed well into the interior of Asia Minor.

Ramifications of the End of Iconoclasm

The reign of Michael was marked by important religious and cultural developments that were to have long-term ramifications. Most obviously, the restoration of ikons created a need (and hence a market) for small- and large-scale religious art. Decorative art, of course, had certainly not disappeared during the Iconoclast period, but since representational art had been forbidden this had been restricted in scale and scope. Now, donors vied with each other to find painters and mosaicists who could redecorate churches that had been stripped of figural art and produce ikons that individuals wanted in their homes and in public places. We cannot trace these developments in detail, but one can imagine that artists struggled to recover old techniques and patterns and to develop new ones that would meet the needs of society at this time.

In addition, with the Iconoclast controversy now ended, the Byzantine church was confident and ready to expand its activities and engage in unprecedented missionary activity, especially among the Slavs, some of whom were creating

Box 9.3 Byzantium and its Neighbors in the Ninth Century

From the ninth century onward Byzantium found itself involved in a world where movements of people and developments elsewhere impacted it in significant ways. In order to understand the history of Byzantium, therefore, it is essential to keep a close watch on developments elsewhere, in western Europe, the Balkans and Caucasus regions, and the Middle East. Many of these phenomena are touched on in the body of the chronological chapters of this book, but it may be useful to summarize the situation here, and in boxes attached to several of the following chapters.

They can also be used with the Comparative Chronology at the end of the book, which presents some of this information in a time line. Any reader who is familiar with the material can simply skip these boxes, but we hope they will be useful to clarify the broader framework against which Byzantine history played out.

Between the fourth and the ninth centuries the area around and north of the Danube River witnessed significant disturbance and the collapse of organized political control. To the west (in modern France, Germany, and Italy) weak states developed in the early Middle Ages, while (of course) the Byzantine Empire remained a strong, reasonably centralized, political state. As a result, a variety of groups of new peoples moved into the northern and central Balkans in this period. Scholars today disagree significantly with the old idea that these were huge population movements that brought totally new people to the region. There was considerable disruption and the area was dominated by tribes and small settlements. The people were mainly farmers, although they were occasionally swept up into large empires.

First, in the fourth and fifth centuries, came various Germanic groups and, of course, the Huns (led by Attila), appeared on the empire's northern frontier. All of these moved westward or disappeared from history. In the sixth century we first hear of the Slavs, along with a more organized group called Avars (a Turkic people who first arrived in the Caucasus about the middle of the century). Some of these people may have settled in parts of the southern Balkans, but loosely related Slavic peoples came to dominate a vast area, from what is now Russia to Poland, the Czech Republic, and most of the Balkans. At the same time, various Turkic peoples (distantly related to the Huns) swept through the area, dominating the local people and occasionally attacking Byzantium, serving as mercenaries and then disappearing. In the seventh century, the most important of these were the Bulgars, a Turkic aristocracy that settled to the north of the Byzantine frontier, in the area of the modern Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In the early ninth century the Bulgars came to pose a serious military threat to Byzantium.

Meanwhile, in the ninth century, the Germanic Franks gained considerable power in the West, and they began to expand militarily (under Charlemagne) into areas of central Europe occupied by Slavic people. In part because of their proximity to the Germans and the danger from them, the Slavic people of Great Moravia (modern Slovakia and the Czech Republic) formed a state. Thus, one can speak of a geopolitical situation, with two superpowers of Byzantium and the German (or western Roman) empire in the east and west. Each of them was culturally and militarily powerful at this time, and they both moved into the territory that lay between them. This was the area dominated by Bulgaria (on the east) and Moravia (on the west).

At the same time, in the East, in Syria and Mesopotamia, the Abbasid caliphate was still powerful. As we have seen, after the death of the Prophet Muhammed (in AD 632) Islam spread over the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain. The Ummayyad caliphate, with its capital in the old (Byzantine) city of Damascus in Syria, seriously threatened the existence of the Byzantine Empire in the late seventh and early eighth century. Ultimately, civil war led to the overthrow of the Ummayyads in the Middle East (although an Ummayyad dynasty continued in power in Muslim Spain until the eleventh century). Their successors, the Abbasids, established their capital at Baghdad in AD 750 and to a degree they shifted their interest away from Byzantium. Nonetheless, Arab raids continued into Byzantine territory in Asia Minor, frequently on an annual basis. The Abbasids developed a strong, centralized state, with a sound financial base and a culture that was certainly on a level with that of Byzantium. Relations between Constantinople and Bagdad were frequently hostile, but the two empires clearly respected each other and regarded each other as worthy adversaries. In the first half of the ninth century some of the caliphate's territories in the East began to act essentially as independent states, marking the start of a process that was ultimately to weaken central control.

To the northeast, the area north of the Black Sea and that of the Caucasus (between the Black and the Caspian Seas) had long been populated by different people, speaking different languages. Among them were the Alans, an Iranian people (some of whom moved later into central Europe), the Laz, and of course the Armenians. This was always a critical area for Byzantium, both because invaders from the northeast might sweep across the steppe corridor from Central Asia and attack Byzantine territory south of the Danube and because Byzantium might ally with peoples in the area to attack their enemies in the East. From time to time this critical area was dominated by alliances of semi-nomadic Turkic people who had moved from Central Asia westward over the course of the centuries. Probably the first of these were the Huns, who (as we have seen) moved into this area in the fourth and fifth centuries, and then moved westward (and disappeared) in the middle of the fifth century. By the middle of the sixth century (as we have seen), the Avars were temporarily a dominant group, replaced in turn by the Khazars from the seventh century. The Khazars established control over much of the Caucasus and southern Russia, in a territory east of that controlled by the Bulgars. They allied with Byzantium, beginning from the reign of Heraklios, and provided military assistance, to the west against the Bulgars and to the south, first against the Persians and then against the Arab caliphate. As such, for a period of over 200 years, the Khazars were the lynch-pin of Byzantine diplomacy and relations between the two states were cordial. In the late eighth and early ninth century, the Khazar leadership accepted Judaism, perhaps in part to maintain neutrality in the struggle between Christianity and Islam. By the end of the ninth century Khazar power began to weaken as a result of the rise of the Patzinaks (Pechenegs) and the Rhos (Rus, forerunners of the Russians).

more sophisticated state-based societies and regarded Byzantium as a model for emulation, and who saw organized religion, especially Christianity, as a mark of civilized culture. In addition, and equally important, considerable missionary work needed to be carried out within the empire itself, or perhaps more correctly in the areas that had essentially been lost to the empire in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Further, the end of the Iconoclastic controversy meant the victory of the monastic movement and the vindication of the hard-line position that many of the monastic leaders had taken. In some ways the situation after 843 was similar to that after the end of the persecutions and the “conversion” of Constantine in the early fourth century: the victorious party could look back to the persecution carried out by their opponents and they looked forward to new ways in which the heroism and determination of the struggle could be repeated in the future. This was not only to raise the position of the monks to a new level within society as a whole; it was also to provide for them new roles as pioneers and frontiersmen and make them heroes and symbols in struggles that were not only spiritual.

On the other hand, even though Iconoclasm was now thoroughly discredited, religious disagreements remained, mainly along lines that had already been drawn at the time ikons were restored over 50 years earlier. In general terms, as discussed above in consideration of events after 787, this disagreement was

between those who wanted a strict application of canon law and punishment for all who were guilty of wrongdoing and/or incorrect belief (including the Iconoclasts), and those who were willing to be more lenient and flexible, especially in the face of practical realities. As mentioned above, we should be careful not to view these groups as political parties in the modern sense, and individuals did not “join” one group or another; rather, this distinction expresses tendencies we can observe that help us understand the religious tensions and difficulties of the period, some of which were ideological, but others of which were more purely personal. Generally speaking, those demanding greater strictness were dominated by monastic leaders, especially those of the Stoudios monastery, and they developed a tradition of appealing to the pope in cases where they felt the patriarch of Constantinople was in error. Those who wished to promote a more lenient view were also led by monks – almost by necessity since, after the end of Iconoclasm, virtually all bishops were chosen from the monasteries, although there was a willingness to select bishops from among (unmarried) laymen (who were then made monks and consecrated as bishops in a short time). Those we may place in this broad group frequently appealed to the theological principle of *oikonomia*, a term which meant that in certain cases the strict letter of canon law might not be applied where leniency or flexibility might be a more appropriate response.

In 858 the patriarch Ignatios (although the son of an emperor) spoke out publicly against what he regarded as immorality among members of Michael III’s court. As a result, Ignatios was forced to resign. In his place, Michael’s uncles chose the learned layman Photios, who already had a significant reputation as a scholar. Photios was reputedly descended from the ancient Greeks and was a nephew of the patriarch Tarasios. His father had suffered persecution as an Iconophile, but Photios secured a position at court and took part in an embassy to the Arabs. His appointment as patriarch naturally angered the supporters of Ignatios, including many of the leading monks, and Michael’s government sought political support by appealing to the authority of Pope Nicholas I (858–67). This was a critical moment, because Nicholas had come to power with the intent of establishing universal papal power, over all other ecclesiastical and secular authorities, in both East and West. As a response to the Byzantine initiative, the pope dispatched legates to Constantinople and they attended a local council in 861. The pope was, in part, interested in the return of areas of southern Italy, Sicily, and the Balkans that had been assigned to Constantinople in the eighth century. The papal legates were unable to

accomplish this goals, but they still approved Photios' elevation. Nicholas, however, soon had misgivings about the situation; he denounced the legates, and in 863 held a synod in Rome that declared Photios deposed. In the same year another local church council was held in Constantinople which declared the deposition of the pope on the basis of what it characterized as illegal interference in the Byzantine church.

The Mission to the Slavs

The resulting so-called “Photian Schism” was especially serious for it came at a time when both the papacy and Byzantium were seeking to expand their respective spheres of interest, especially in the territories settled by the Slavs. In 860 Constantinople had been surprised by an attack from the Rhos; these were a people, generally recognized as the ancestors of the Russians, who lived along the river systems that ran north and south, in one direction to the Baltic Sea and in the other to the Black Sea. The Rhos may originally have been a Scandinavian military aristocracy – similar to the Vikings – but they had already gained control over the Slavic peoples who lived in this area, and they all but certainly represented a mixed population, whose economy was based partly on trade and raiding along the Russian river system. In 860 the Rhos descended quickly from the Black Sea and attacked Constantinople. In a surviving sermon the patriarch Photios describes the alarm felt by the people of Constantinople and their thankfulness when the enemy fleet was dispersed by the intervention of the Virgin Mary: in fact, the Byzantine fleet drove them away. The Rhos were not only a threat to Constantinople, which presumably could defend itself adequately from such an attack, but, probably more importantly, their actions north of the Black Sea showed that the Khazars were no longer able to play the role they had in that region. The Khazars, it should be remembered, had been the basis of Byzantine military and diplomatic efforts at the western end of the steppe corridor for two centuries, and their decline meant that the Byzantines had to re-evaluate their alliances in this region.

Box 9.4 Byzantium and the Papacy in the Ninth Century

The present section focuses on the relations between Byzantium and the papacy up to the outbreak of the Photian Schism in the middle of the ninth century. Much of this has been touched upon in

the preceding chapters, but it is probably worthwhile to provide an overview of this issue up to this time. This question has the additional difficulty that modern Christians have varying views of the history of the churches in this period. Thus, Catholics generally view the popes as the successors of St. Peter, who governed the whole Christian church from the beginning of Christianity to the present day. Protestants, by contrast, generally feel that the papacy was a human institution that came to control the medieval church and, in so doing modified and corrupted original Christian teaching. Orthodox Christians hold something of a middle position. While accepting that bishops rightfully govern the church and that the bishop of Rome (the pope) has a position of respect that makes him the first among equals among bishops, they disagree with the proposition that the pope has any direct administrative or spiritual authority outside the western church. Our consideration here naturally does not seek to determine who is right in this disagreement, but to trace the development of the situation across the centuries and how this impacted on the history of the Byzantine Empire. While we respect the beliefs (and disbeliefs) of all, as historians we should remember that our ideas today on the position of the papacy were not necessarily those held by individuals in the past. In addition, we should remember that the popes and patriarchs of Constantinople were not simply religious leaders, but they also had – in all periods – political and economic power and it is not unreasonable that they were concerned with and influenced by issues other than religious ones.

Nothing need be said here about the development of the papacy in the first three centuries, both because the situation is exceedingly complex and controversial and because it lies outside the purview of this book. By the time of Constantine, however, the pope, as the bishop of Rome, had clearly become the main church leader in the West (Italy, North Africa, Gaul, etc.) and that various popes were making claims of a more universal character. We should bear in mind that this was part of a larger phenomenon in which bishops came to dominate the whole of the Christian church and in which the bishops of important cities of the Roman Empire began to claim administrative dominance of larger areas. Thus, we can see that at the time of Constantine the bishop of Alexandria was already a significant rival of the bishop of Rome, and the bishops of other imperial residences (Antioch, Trier, Sirmium, Nikomedeia) were making broad claims of their own. Two events that changed the situation significantly were, first, the conversion of Constantine (however we understand it) and his support for and involvement in the religious disputes of his reign and, second, the foundation of Constantinople and its development as the main residence for the emperors in the fourth and fifth centuries. As a result, we can see the rise in the power and importance of the bishop of Constantinople in this period. The ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381 stated that the bishop of Constantinople was to rank second only to the bishop of Rome, while the Council of Chalcedon in 451 decreed that Constantinople should rank equal to the bishop of Rome, except that the latter should have greater seniority, while the five patriarchs of the church (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem) should each be independent in governing their own territories. The collapse of the Roman Empire in the West (in the fifth century) meant that the power of the pope was essentially unquestioned there, while the loss of the Near East to the Arabs (in the seventh century) meant that the patriarch of Constantinople held a similar position in the East.

Over the next two centuries there were disputes between the two churches, especially the attempts of various emperors (e.g., Zeno, Anastasius, Herakleios) to find a compromise with the Monophysites, since the papacy always remained staunchly Chalcedonian (dyophysite) in its theology; this resulted, among other things, in the so-called Akakian Schism (484–519) in which some Byzantine theologians (such as John Talaia, patriarch of Alexandria), appealed to Rome against Constantinople. The position of the papacy was weakened by the reconquest of Italy and North Africa by Justinian in the mid sixth century, resulting in direct Byzantine interference in the independence of the pope by the exarch of Ravenna, the imperial representative in Italy. In the

meantime, popes such as Gregory I (590–604) sought to revive the power and prestige of the papacy, which had also fallen significantly in the rest of the West. Gregory did this, in part, by imposing strict morality in his own court and by carrying out a vigorous missionary program in Britain and Germany, as well as by developing new theological ideas and devotional practices, some of which differed from those used in Byzantium at the same time. Nonetheless, during most of the seventh century the papacy continued to look to the Byzantine emperor as an ally and its most important military supporter against the threat of the Lombards.

The events of the eighth century dramatically changed the relationship between the papacy and the Byzantine Empire. On the one hand, the Iconoclasm of the emperors after 726 again estranged the two churches: the papacy continued to support the veneration of ikons, while Byzantium was officially Iconoclast. As a result, each side officially excommunicated the other and many Byzantine Iconophiles fled to Italy in order to escape persecution at home. Likewise, from the mid seventh century onward, many Christians from areas occupied by the Arabs moved to Byzantinedominated areas of southern Italy, thus strengthening Byzantine ecclesiastical influence there. Thus, it is perhaps ironic that, although in the eighth century the two churches were not in communion, there was considerable interaction and several of the popes of this period were Greek-speaking.

Nevertheless, the inability or unwillingness of Byzantium to provide military help to the papacy in the eighth century had important consequences, as the popes turned to the Franks for help against the Lombards and their abandonment of a military alliance with Byzantium. The crucial points in this development were Pope Stephen II's consecration of Pippin I as king of the Franks in 754, and Pope Leo III's epochmaking coronation of Charles the Great (Charlemagne) as emperor in AD 800. From this point onward the universalist claims of the papacy were to be joined to the imperial ambitions of the German emperors against the emperors and their church in Constantinople. Of course, it would not be long for conflict to arise within western Christianity, as reformers (such as Pope Nicholas I: see above) would use papal claims as the foundation for the independence of the church from secular rulers. This struggle between pope and emperor in the West would have far-reaching ramifications within the West but also in relations between the eastern and the western churches.

Immediately the court dispatched a missionary embassy to the Khazars, in the hope that by converting them to Christianity, the Byzantines would be able to draw them more closely into the Byzantine fold. This mission was led by Constantine, later missionary to the Slavs, but he was unable to accomplish his goal, and the Khazars eventually accepted Judaism as their religion. This missionary activity, however, was not totally without result, since it prepared the way for a much greater mission that was soon to come.

In the early ninth century, after the disappearance of the Avar khanate, Great Moravia arose as the first Slavic state in central Europe. Although the precise location of Great Moravia is uncertain, it was presumably in the area now occupied by the modern Czech Republic and Slovakia. Moravia grew in size and its greatest ruler, Prince Ratislav (846–70), sought to maintain his country's independence from the expansionist tendencies of the Frankish (German) Empire. In 862 Ratislav requested that Constantinople send missionaries to his

country to replace the Frankish embassy that was already present and to organize an independent church that would use his subjects' Slavic language, instead of Latin, in the liturgy. All this happened, one should remember, against the background of the dispute between the papacy and Constantinople over the legitimacy of Photios as patriarch of Constantinople. Thus, the pope's unilateral deposition of Photios (863) certainly encouraged the patriarch to support a Byzantine missionary delegation to Moravia, where the Franks, the papacy, and Byzantium were to be locked in a struggle for pre-eminence. In addition, we should bear in mind that, at the same time, the Frankish church and the papacy were not on good terms, since part of Pope Nicholas' policy was to extend papal control there.

The Byzantine mission was led by Constantine the Philosopher (later known as Cyril, or Kyrillos) and his brother Methodios. These two monks from the region of Thessaloniki were already known in Constantinople for their erudition. Constantine had come to Constantinople and attracted the attention of Theoktistos, who helped him attain an excellent education. He became a priest, but was then appointed teacher of philosophy at the university in the Magnaura (part of the imperial palace). Constantine earned a formidable reputation as a debater and was able to defeat John Grammatikos in disputation. Later, he presented the cause of Byzantine Christianity at the court of the Khazars and also at the caliph's court at Samarra. Constantine's older brother Methodios held an imperial political position in an apparently Slavic-speaking area of Macedonia, but he eventually became a monk and may have accompanied his brother in the embassy to the Khazars. Both brothers apparently knew the language of the Slavic peoples settled around Thessaloniki (and it is possible that their mother was herself a Slav).

Before leaving for Moravia, Constantine created an alphabet (later called the Glagolitic alphabet) for the Slavonic language which had hitherto been only a spoken tongue. That this alphabet was based on the letters of the Greek alphabet explains the similarity in appearance between Greek and the modern Cyrillic alphabet (named after Constantine/Cyril) that is used for Russian, Serbian, and related languages. While still in Constantinople, Constantine began the translation of the Bible and Byzantine liturgical texts into Slavonic and he took these texts along with him for use in Moravia. The principle of carrying out missionary activity in the language of the local peoples was different from the practice of the Roman church, which insisted on the use of Latin for religious literature and for the liturgy. It naturally gave the Byzantine missionaries a

distinct advantage and also set a precedent that was to have important ramifications for the development of culture among the peoples influenced by Byzantium, for the Byzantines did not insist on cultural dominance but instead encouraged the maintenance of local traditions, always, of course, influenced by the culture of the Byzantine capital.

Meanwhile, under the command of his uncle Petronas, Michael III's armies were remarkably successful, especially in the East. Petronas reached the Euphrates in 856, crossed it and attacked Amida some distance beyond. One of the reasons for this was a growing weakness in the Abbasid caliphate and the emergence of semi-independent emirs along the frontier with Byzantium. In 860 'Omar, the emir of Meletine, supported by the Paulicians, attacked deep into Byzantine territory and returned with considerable booty. Three years later, in 863, he attacked again, but was trapped by an army commanded by Petronas (and possibly Michael himself); the emir was killed and his army practically annihilated. In retrospect, this victory was a turning point in the long struggle between Byzantium and the Arabs, and for the next century and a half the Byzantines were to be generally on the offensive, first arranging for the security of Asia Minor and then gradually attacking Arab positions in the East. The victories of Petronas, of course, also allowed the Byzantines to concentrate their attention in the Balkans and the West.

This was especially fortunate, for the disagreement with the papacy (the Photian Schism), the mission to the Slavs, and the need to secure stability in areas north of the Black Sea were to demand all the empire's resources at the time. In the first of these the government of Michael III stood firmly behind the patriarch. The emperor wrote to the pope, asserting the independence of the Byzantine church and demanding that the decision against Photios be rescinded. Photios escalated the conflict beyond the issue of papal supremacy by accusing the western church of errors in practice and in faith. In particular, he pointed to the western insertion of the phrase *filioque* ("and through the Son") into the Nicene Creed's definition of the origin of the Holy Spirit; in the original document, the text had said simply that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father, but the addition of the *filioque* meant that the western church believed that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father "and the Son." Photios pointed out that this was an innovation in the faith and that it changed the way Christians thought about relationships among the members of the Trinity. As mentioned, the emperor summoned a local council in Constantinople and this condemned the *filioque*, rejected papal interference in the Byzantine church, and

excommunicated Pope Nicholas.

Meanwhile, in 863 the Byzantine mission of Constantine and Methodios set off for Moravia, armed with the translations into the Slavonic language. The mission was initially successful and, led by Ratislav's encouragement, the country accepted Byzantine Christianity. A local church was organized and the liturgy was celebrated, using the Slavonic language. The Frankish clergy in Moravia, however, hindered the Byzantine missionaries, and Constantine and Methodios sought the assistance of the pope in their endeavor. As a result, in 867 the brothers journeyed to Rome and shortly after their arrival there Constantine died. Methodios returned to Moravia in 870, but he was arrested and imprisoned by the Franks. Ultimately the Byzantine missionaries were expelled from Moravia, since Frankish military power, allied with the papacy, was closer at hand, and the Moravian church ultimately fell under the control of the western church.

The Byzantine missionaries trained in Moravia, however, were able to apply their skills and the translations of holy books in the conversion of Bulgaria. This country, it should be remembered, was ruled by a relatively small Turkic aristocracy, while the vast majority of the population was Slav. In addition, Bulgaria's position was a critical one; the two major military powers in Eastern Europe were the Frankish empire (in the West) and Byzantium (in the East); between them lay Moravia and Bulgaria. Once Moravia accepted Christianity, and at first alliance with Byzantium, the Bulgarians were, in effect, surrounded. In that situation, the Bulgarian prince Boris sent an embassy to the Franks, seeking alliance and missionaries. Michael III, however, dispatched the Byzantine army – fresh from its victory over the Arabs – to the Bulgarian frontier, demonstrating in this period the close relationship between religious and military affairs. As a result, Boris accepted alliance with Byzantium and was baptized, probably in 864, with Michael as his sponsor. The Bulgar aristocrats rose in opposition to the Christianization of the country and Boris-Michael (as he was henceforth known) put them down savagely, beheading 52 of them. The conversion of Bulgaria then proceeded apace, one might say, from the top down, as a result of the baptism of the prince. The church was organized and administered by Byzantine clergy, trained in the Slavonic language, but acting initially on the orders of the patriarch of Constantinople. Although Bulgaria remained politically independent and there would be times in the future when the two states fought especially bitter wars, from 864 onward Bulgaria remained definitively in the Byzantine sphere of influence and the conversion of the

Bulgarians was one of the greatest and most important Byzantine political and cultural achievements.

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PRIMARY SOURCES IN TRANSLATION

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Theodore of Stoudios (Theodore the Studite), a monk with important political as well as religious credentials, wrote many significant works, but few of them have been translated. His “Testament,” written toward the end of his life, contains many of his views on the monastic life. Timothy Miller, trans., in J. Thomas and A. C. Hero, eds., *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents*, Dumbarton Oaks Studies 35, Washington DC, 2000, vol. 1, pp. 67–83. See also C. P. Roth, trans., *On the Holy Icons*. Crestwood, NY, 1983.